



## THE BRIEF: IS THE US A RELUCTANT EMPIRE?

### TRANSCRIPT – SEPTEMBER 2013

*Obama (August 2012): “That’s a red line for us, there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons.”*

**Anne-Marie Slaughter:** The first protests start in March of 2011. They start because teenagers have been tortured for graffiti. At that point, people are marching across the Middle East and North Africa, the Syrians join. They march for nine months more or less without firing back.

**David Kilcullen:** That society had already reached breaking point with respect to electricity, to water, to all those things that sustain life.

**Slaughter:** So they’re getting killed in the streets, the regime is getting more and more violent.

*Obama (May 16, 2013): “Assad lost legitimacy when he started firing on his own people.”*

*Walid Muallem: “We are all hearing the drums of war around us.”*

**John McCain:** Hezbollah poured in.

*Putin: “Will we help Syria? We will.”*

*Nassif Hitti (a senior Arab League official): “Take measures against the perpetrators of this crime.”*

*Nabil Fahmy: “Egypt is against Western military intervention.”*

**Slaughter:** He released an awful lot of the jihadists he had in jail. He wanted this to be between him and violent extremists and he did everything he could to make that happen.

*Assad: “80 to 90 percent of the rebels on the ground, or the terrorists, are al-Qaeda.”*

**Slaughter:** It’s very cynical stuff.

**Kilcullen:** The foreign fighter flows into Syria completely dwarf any level of foreign fighter movement that we saw in Iraq.

*Nusra fighter: "We are not affiliated with anyone inside or outside of Syria."*

*Abu Hasan (Jabhat al-Nusra): "If al-Qaeda works to establish law and justice among the people and spreads religion in the country, then we are with al-Qaeda."*

**McCain:** They are not extremists and jihadists, and the Syrian people will reject extremists and jihadists.

*Hisham Rama (Syrian National Council): "We are 100 percent sure that the Iranians are involved in killing civilians in Syria."*

*Vitaly Churkin: "I think some colleagues jumped to their conclusions."*

*Hong Lei: "China is deeply concerned about certain countries preparing for unilateral military action."*

**Stephen Hadley:** The United States really has four interests in, at least four interests in what's going on in Syria. To give imposed consequences for the chemical use that Syria's already done, and make sure there is no repetition of it. Bringing to the end a war that has been a humanitarian disaster for the Syrian people. A war that is increasingly sectarian and is spreading beyond its borders and risk destabilizing Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey. And a war that is facilitating al-Qaeda, and then finally of course, this is an effort by Iran to, through Hezbollah, to extend its hegemony.

**Mark Jacobson:** Hezbollah is essentially controlled by the Syrians and the Iranians. And we've seen Hezbollah aggression cross border against Israel. We're seeing the dissolution of the Lebanese state for what, the third time in my lifetime, as a result of, of this basically Hezbollah fighting with the rest of, with the rest of the country.

**Andrew Bacevich:** When an event like Syria erupts those who believe in the American mission and American uniqueness, see Syria as an opportunity to, to demonstrate how special we are.

**James Gelvin:** And then of course Obama made his ill fated red line comments.

*Obama: "We start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus, that would change my equation."*

*John Kerry: "Our sense of basic humanity was offended."*

*John Boehner: "The use of these weapons have to be responded to."*

**Hadley:** And If we do nothing more people will die, it'll be more sectarian, we'll open the door more for Al Qaeda, and Assad is already, during the week of the negotiations, had doubled down. So those are the things that happen if we don't do something.

**Jacobson:** I do believe a very important red line has been crossed. A red line that I believe justified the immediate use of force by the United States.

**Bacevich:** I'm always struck by those making the humanitarian argument: There are people suffering, we need to help them, and therefore we should bomb Damascus. It's not clear to me how bombing Damascus is going to alleviate the suffering.

*Obama: "I have decided that the United States should take military action against Syrian regime targets."*

*CBS presenter: There is a new CBS-New York Times poll this morning that finds the vast majority of Americans, 61% oppose a US military strike on Syria.*

*Vox pop: "We got to take care of our own."*

*Syrian soldier: "What chemical weapons, there's been no proof."*

*Elderly Syrian man: "Syria is the only Arab nation resisting Western colonialism and Israel."*

*Press TV SOT: "Saudi Arabia says it will support the U.S. military intervention in Syria."*

**Jacobson:** No matter what actions you take, there are going to be negative second order effects.

**Marwan Bishara [voice-over/VO]:** No one denies that America has the ability to take action and that America can make that decision on its own. The rest of the world can applaud, disparage, threaten, or whine, but no one can force the United States to act and no one can stop it. If one head of state can tell another head of state what he can do in his own country, what does that make the country that gives the orders? An empire?

**Slaughter:** Certainly not an empire! [laughs] And not at this point.

**Gelvin:** Invasion and occupation is a failure of American policy. If we can do it by having collaborators in other places, if we can do it by getting people to sign on to treaties, by getting people to set up free trade zones, then this is a success for the United States.

**Richard Betts:** But that's still different from real empire which means one country subjugating and exploiting another, which was much more the way the world was organized before the middle of the twentieth century.

**Jacobson:** We know our vital national security interests include supporting our allies but we also know that vital national security interests include countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** Everyone expected Washington to strike, and strike hard. But instead there was inaction. Confusion. Reflection. Considerations. Investigations. Assad was not intimidated. He struck back. His weapon of choice, a TV talk show.

*Assad (Charlie Rose interview): "Obama can draw lines for himself and for his country, not for other countries. We have our red lines, like our sovereignty, and our independence. Why did the United States fail in most of its wars? Because it always based its wars on the wrong information."*

**Bacevich:** The American people don't want another Iraq. The international community is not providing any significant support. And so for domestic political reasons, that leads the administration, specifically to Kerry to try to minimize the significance of any military action. Of course as soon as they do that, in effect they're saying that any military action will by definition be ineffective.

**Edward Luttwak [VO]:** Any military strike would have been such a disaster that virtually any known alternative would have been better.

*Jon Stewart: "Remind us again why we have to do this?"*

*Man: "The more reluctant you and the more deliberative you are, the danger is you could start looking weak."*

*Man 2: "Bullies and tyrants don't respect weakness."*

*Jon Stewart: "Oh right, we have to bomb Syria because we're in 7th grade!"*

**Phyllis Bennis:** I think that we have to go back to the basics, that it was illegal, it would have been immoral because it would have created more casualties as all the military leaders said. It would not have stopped the war, it would not have prevented any use of chemical weapons by anyone — and it would have been dangerous, because as much as the war in Syria is now already — it's spread into at least five separate wars that are being waged to the last Syrian — that would have been spreading even further if the US had gone in directly with a direct military intervention.

**Luttwak:** In order for the United States not to intervene, the United States has to now progress to a new status, the new status is that we have to issue one of our doctrines, like the Monroe Doctrine, one of those things, and say that the armed forces of the United States shall not be employed in any area but for the immediate protection of American citizens who are facing immediate peril, or something like that. Otherwise there's a presumption of intervention.

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** War seemed more inevitable than ever. But then, like a *deus ex machina*, a god coming down on stage to fix things, Vladimir Putin appeared.

*CBS presenter: "On Monday the President suggested he might support a plan that would require Syria to surrender its chemical weapons stockpile."*

*Alan West: "You know Vladimir Putin has pretty much played President Obama — if I can use an old southern term — like a broken banjo."*

*Rudy Giuliani: "They've been completely incomprehensible."*

*David Ignatius (NPR): "Diplomacy has been going on for nearly two years and finally came to fruition this week in what seemed a series of accidents but in fact were not."*

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** The deal got Obama off the hook. Chemical weapons off the battlefield. Let Russia act like a world power, it was a win, win, win. But what about the tens of thousands of Syrians who would continue to die in a civil war. If Assad stays, so

do the secret police and the torture. If he goes, what follows, chaos? Who is responsible? Who is supposed to act? Is it up to the world's sole superpower? What are the consequences if the United States acts? What are the consequence if it doesn't?

*Obama: "I believe that America is exceptional – in part because we have shown a willingness, through the sacrifice of blood and treasure, to stand up not only for our own narrow self-interests, but for the interests of all"*

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** This time –

*Obama: "I have a deeply held preference for peaceful solutions."*

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** Did this mean that there are contradictory impulses in the American soul – to rule, or at least control the world?

*President Reagan: "Mr Gorbachev teared down this wall!"*

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** Or to tend its own garden and let everyone find their own way? Is America a reluctant empire?

*Al Pacino (The Godfather): "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in!"*

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** Or, was this just a swing of the pendulum, from hubris to modesty.

**Hamid Dabashi:** The word "reluctance" I don't think is an appropriate word. This is liberal imperialism. This is, this is as Obama and before him Hillary Clinton, Secretary Clinton said, its soft power. They operate with soft power, with covert operations, with proxy wars, with special operations, economic sanctions, drone attacks. This is a different warfare. It is a different mode of military operations.

**Hadley:** What we learned was, military power could topple a regime. Military power was not enough to reconstruct a society. And the lesson we learned unfortunately too well, was watch out for sins of commission, watch out for using military power when you don't have a plan. But what we're learning in Syria is there are also sins of omission, of omission.

**Karen Greenberg:** This is a learning curve, this is a learning curve.

**Slaughter:** The way we intervened in Bosnia, the way we intervened in Kosovo, the way we intervened in Libya, in all those cases, I think we got a better outcome with more room for more parties than we would have gotten had we just let the war continue.

**Betts:** What some of the long bloody messes in Iraq and Afghanistan have done over the past dozen years is to turn American opinion in a more skeptical direction.

**Gelvin:** You get the liberal interventionists, people who think that the United States can change things for humanitarian reasons or for whatever reasons. Neocons who have been very, very quick to reach for a gun. Anti-interventionists, liberals, libertarians, who are just out and out isolationists.

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** The first argument that America is not an empire is that it doesn't seize territory.

**Luttwak:** Nineteen-forty-three, American troops landing in Italy, and the Italians seeing these Americans, their uniforms that were made of real wool, and these American soldiers giving out cans of corned beef and stuff like that. This was an America that was benevolent in its effects; benevolent in every manifestation. Applauded, embraced, kissed on both cheeks and wonderfully well-liked.

*Colin Powell: "When America came home from these wars we never asked for any land, we never asked for sovereignty over these countries, we only asked for enough land to bury our dead."*

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** The other argument is that Americans are just too nice to be real imperialists. Americans thought it was their manifest destiny to "overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given" them. And in order to expand from sea to shining sea the new Americans engaged in three hundred years of warfare with the Native Americans. Expansion didn't stop at the water's edge. It was a "splendid little war." And profitable, too.

The United States has expanded much like any other empire. Denying that requires a form of delusion followed by historic amnesia.

**Gelvin:** With the advent of the modern period, the natures of empires changed.

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** By the middle of the 20th Century, the United States had stopped acquiring territory. But it kept acquiring power.

**Dabashi:** There are 720 military bases, U.S. military bases around, around the world.

**Betts:** The United States is the only superpower in the world that exerts influence everywhere in the world. The United States has been the dominant force, the leader supplying the principle sorts of security guarantees, dominating economic rules of the game and so on.

**Kilcullen:** It has not only interests but also obligations to the international community.

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** Still, many would deny that the United States is an empire because of its ideals. That it only fights to bring freedom and democracy to the world.

*George Bush: "Our nation enters this conflict reluctantly, yet our purpose is sure."*

*George H.W. Bush: "Only did this as a last resort."*

**Kilcullen:** I think it's unfashionable to talk about that, but it's the truth. Other countries that had the level of power that the United States have would almost certainly behave in a much, in a way much less supportive of international stability and the benefits of other countries. The United States isn't like other countries.

**Rami Khouri:** It's an empire of the mind, it's an empire of militarism, and it's an empire of mannerisms. It wants people in the world to behave like it behaves.

**Luttwak:** We're going to change the entire country and its culture. We're going to go to Afghanistan and turn it into Sweden, okay?

**Hadley:** I don't think America throws around its power. I think it tries to use its power to achieve objectives that are good for the United States and good for the world.

**Luttwak:** The American nation is not a racial nation. They're not a religious entity. They are an ideological entity. And right in the beginning, President Washington as he left office said, we have to decide whether our project of bringing liberty when it is our duty to also extend it. And right then there was a debate between Americans who wanted to bring the American ideals to the whole planet.

**Bacevich:** We're different, we're special, we're chosen. Everybody else wants to be like us.

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** It is not only possible to be an empire *with* ideals, even an empire *of* ideals, idealism may even be a necessary ingredient of the imperial recipe.

**Drayton:** When Hitler dismembers Czechoslovakia in 1938, he does so in the name of the protection, the humanitarian protection, of minorities. When Europe partitions Africa at the Congress of Berlin of 1884, 85, it does so in the name of the humanitarian protection of Africans.

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** Of course, empires almost always think they're doing the rest of the world a favor. When the weight of the Anglo-Saxon world domination began to shift from Britain to America, the poet of empire, Rudyard Kipling wrote:

"Take up the White Man's Burden  
Send forth the best ye breed --  
Go bind your sons to exile  
to serve the captives need:  
to wait in heavy harness,



on fluttered folk and wild  
your new-caught, sullen peoples,  
half-devil half-child.”

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** Still, many people believe that America exercises its power for the world’s own good.

**Marwan Bishara [VO]:** If America is the world’s policeman, it needs a vision of legality.  
**Gelvin:** The cornerstone of international law is that individual countries cannot make the decision to use force against another country except for two exceptions, number one, self-defense, and number two, unless it is sanctioned by the Security Council of the United Nations.”

**Betts:** After the Cold War there were neo-conservatives who were very hot to use American power to make the, the world as we thought it should be. And there were a lot of democratic liberals who, while they said, we should do it in a different way, we should do it multilaterally with the cooperation of the United Nations or NATO wanted to use American power to bring order and stability to the world. But that was a gradual process.

**Jacobson:** We didn’t have responsibility to protect as a doctrine in 1939, or ’36, or ’38, with the way the Germans were treating Jews, Gypsies, Roma and others. But the idea is that responsibility to protect, R2P, is a right of intervention by other states when a state has breached norms, especially in terms of standards of conduct against its own people.

**Slaughter:** I think we are evolving towards responsibility to protect. That was a norm that all the nations in the UN signed off on at the 2005 Millennium Conference.

**Jacobson:** At what point does a state’s use of armed force against its own people result in a situation where they have given up their right to have sovereign control of their own people? In other words, at what point do Assad’s actions mean that he is no longer a legitimate sovereign power?

**Slaughter:** The idea that a government cannot commit crimes against humanity or genocide or war crimes against its own people will seem as normal as the basic idea of human rights does today.

**Drayton:** I would come from exactly the opposite direction. Imperialism was the sudden acquisition by Europe of the new forms of power that came from industrial production,

which led to the weapons revolution of the 19th century, and the capacity to apply massive force at a distance.

I would suggest that what underlies the increased appetite to intervene abroad is the acquisition of new forms of power.

**Jacobson:** It's not just the ghost of Iraq that's driving US policy right now, it's the ghost of Vietnam it's the ghost of Rwanda, it's the ghost of Bosnia, the ghost of Kosovo. Where we did take action or where we didn't take action.

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